The Construction of Societal Values

Oranges are not the only fruit is a short novel written by Jeanette Winterson (1960- ). The novel is not fully an autobiography, although it has some resemblance to the author’s life. In this novel there are many conflicts. I will mention a few of the conflicts which have a dominant role in the novel: Good-Evil, Natural-Unnatural and Men-Women. These are some of the conflicts which have a central role in the novel and similarly are a matter of debate in society. The conflicts are described from a feminist perspective. The author demonstrates the difficulty individuals who fail to incorporate the societal values are faced with, for instance, homosexuals. “In fact, Oranges deals absolutely with emotions and confrontations that none of us can avoid. First love, loss, grief, rage and above all courage, these are the engines that drive the narrative through the peculiar confines of the story” (xiv). “Oranges is an experimental novel; its interests are anti-linear. It offers a complicated narrative structure disguised as a simple one” (xiii). Now, I will argue that the motive of the author is to demonstrate that societal values solely are constructions which are based on traditional perceptions of what is normative and acceptable. The title of the novel strongly suggest that one view of perception is not and should not set the standard for the normative view on homosexuality.

In the beginning of the novel the protagonist, Jeanette, is living with her adoptive mother and father. The protagonist’s parents are very religious and virtuous. Apparently Jeanette’s mother was too virtuous to conceive a child of her own, therefore she did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling. It is in the youth of the protagonist’s life that she discovers “that everything in the natural world is a symbol of the Great Struggle between Good and Evil” (15). In her youth, the protagonist starts thinking about how repulsive she finds the other sex. The protagonist describes how horrible she finds Pastor Finch and how sorry she is for Mrs. Finch. “His teeth stuck out, and his voice was squeaky, even though he tried to make it deep and stern. Poor Mrs. Finch. How did she live with him? Then I remembered the gypsy. ‘You’ll never marry.’ That might not be such a bad thing after all” (13). This quote exemplifies the early thoughts of the protagonist. These thoughts would later be formulated as the protagonist’s conspiracy theory of women-men;beasts which states: A lot of women will marry men whom metaphorically can be characterized as beasts. This is a problem which women are faced with which is not in accordance with feminist views on egalitarian relations between women and men. Moreover, this clearly states the feminist perspective of the novel and the conflict between Men-Women.
The protagonist’s mother is probably contributing to Jeanette’s feelings of repulsiveness towards men. During the protagonist’s childhood, Jeanette’s mother used to “[e]xtemporise on the nature of the world, the folly of its peoples, and the wrath of God inevitable. After that she would tell Jeanette a story about a brave person who had despised the fruits of the flesh and worked for the Lord instead…” (7).

Raising a child according to the Christian values, the protagonist’s mother would rather have wanted Jeanette staying out of school. Jeanette, on the contrary, was curious about school because her mother had always called it a Breeding Ground. “I didn’t know what she meant, but I knew it was a bad thing, like Unnatural Passions. ‘They’ll lead you astray’, was the only answer I got” (16). It is clear that the protagonist’s mother had quite an influence on Jeanette’s thinking. This example also represents a conflict between Good-Evil. The church is considered, by the protagonist’s mother, to be the only teaching necessary for a child, whereas school education is seen as Evil, perhaps because students are taught of sexuality and knowledge which defies God.

The protagonist does not have many friends, neither as a child nor as an adult, it seems. However, the protagonist does find a friend in an elderly woman, Elsie Norris, who is a numerologist. Although, towards the end of the novel, Jeanette is betrayed by Elsie who reveals that Jeanette is seeing Melanie and experiences unnatural passions of the flesh.

It is Elsie who offers Jeanette fruitcake. Fruitcake is often expressed as an insulting description of a homosexual. Jeanette refuses the fruitcake because it is old. However, Jeanette tells Elsie that she refuses the fruitcake because of sufferings from colic. I claim that this passage of the novel could be interpreted as a metaphor; Jeanette refuses the fruitcake, which represents homosexuality, because she has not yet formulated her conspiracy theory. The Christian view on homosexuality is conservative and considered to be an illness. Jeanette is in fact refusing the fruitcake because of the Christian perception on homosexuality. Jeanette knows she is being offered a forbidden passion. I believe that the author is describing a young confused girl’s emotions with this passage and her struggle between what is acceptable and not.

Although later in the protagonist’s life, in her relationship with Melanie, Jeanette will have liberated herself sufficiently from the oppressive Christian values and come to the conclusion that you cannot counteract your true emotions. This quote will describe my suggestion: “After the exorcism I had tried to replace my world with another just like it, but I couldn’t. I loved God and I loved the church, but I began to see that as more and more complicated” (126). The author wants to describe the difficulty a homosexual faces as the protagonist has to choose whether to follow her emotions or the traditional societal values. This also reflects the societal view on homosexuality. Homosexuals are considered to be possessed by demons and supposed to suffer from some kind of illness. The reason for not permitting homosexuality between women, in particular, is because the dominance over women by men will be threatened and reduced. Traditional values are male biased. Thus, homosexuality is
considered an unnatural or forbidden passion of the flesh. This is a lucid example of the conflict between Men-Women.

When the protagonist decides to leave the church, she “[c]annot imagine what would become of her, and she does not care. It was not judgment day, but another morning” (134). This quote strongly suggest that the religious values are constructions and solely constructions; it is not the end of the world to leave the church.

I will give an additional example of a constructed societal value which the author sheds light on. The author raises a question to the reader: “Can love really belong to a demon?” (106). In the novel it is suggested that the orange demon is the one which beguiles. Jeanette’s aura is orange, that is why she got stuck with an orange demon. The author wants to describe that homosexuality is to be considered normal. That is, the societal construction that homosexuality is unnatural is first and foremost solely a construction. The author demonstrated this by describing the protagonist as a person with an orange aura. The color and the fruit orange should be interpreted in this novel as representing homosexuality and a forbidden fruit. What is forbidden is, of course, a normative value constructed by society.

As a final illustration of my thesis that the author wants to show the construction of societal values from a feminist perspective, I will describe the conflict between Natural-Unnatural which is expressed when the author describes the school project the protagonist will make in sewing class. Jeanette is not permitted to choose what to write on her sampler for Elsie. Jeanette’s teacher says it might upset others. Jeanette believes that the reason for her teacher not permitting Jeanette to write the text Jeanette had wanted is because the school teacher “recognized things according to her expectations and environment” (43-44). The author concludes that the school teacher, like most people, react with panic when faced with something “incomprehensible”. I claim that the author is describing the reaction of all people in society when an individual does not reflect the expectations of the majority. The individual, then, is considered odd or extraordinary, as is the case with homosexuals. This provides further evidence for my thesis.

The story ends with the tragic news concerning the case of “the Society for the Lost” which was a bitter blow to Jeanette’s mother. I propose that the name of the religious association carries a symbolic meaning; it is a metaphor for our society. “The Society for the lost” is a critique of our society and its dominant values. We live in a society in which we have lost the basic principles of humanity; that all humans are equal, independent of sex and sexuality.

In conclusion, I have argued that the author of Oranges wants to illustrate the construction of societal values from a feminist perspective and thereby demonstrate the difficulty an individual who fail to incorporate these values is faced with. The constructions of societal values can be found in the conflicts which I have given examples of above described in the novel: Good-Evil, Natural-Unnatural and Men-Women. Societal values are solely constructions; therefore, they constantly have to be evaluated and discussed. The author claims that “it is the duty of every generation of writers and artists to find fresh ways of expressing the habitual circumstances of the human condition” (xv). I believe that this is what
the author has done in her novel by illustrating that heterosexuality as the standard norm in society solely is a constructed normative value. The author has shown, from a feminist perspective, that heterosexuality is not the only sexuality in society; it is only the dominant norm.

Work Cited